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A chunk of masonry tumbled down the side of a huge pile of rubble, the fleeting movement in the silent wasteland instantly drawing Rachel’s attention. Dana’s black hole had sucked away all the dust that had been kicked up when Alyssa flattened the city block, which gave the brunette a crystal-clear view of the emerging automaton. She aimed her Tachyon rifle at the floundering thrall, centring the crosshairs on its dusty chestplate as it finally managed to break free of the demolished building.

Despite being buried under thousands of tons of debris, this wasn’t the first robotic trooper that had survived the devastation. It had taken a couple of minutes for the first to appear, then several more had torn themselves free of the shattered ruins. Fortunately for the brunette, they’d emerged individually rather than as a group, so it had been easy to pick them off one at a time.

Rachel was about to squeeze the trigger, when the synthetic soldier seemed to freeze, its arms and legs locking in position. The robot pitched over to land on its face, then lay perfectly still, its limbs held in the same awkward pose. She zoomed in using her Paragon suit’s HUD and searched for any sign of moment, but it was completely rigid, almost as if rigor mortis had set in.

\*Incoming friendlies!\*

When she heard Alyssa’s telepathic voice, Rachel slid down the Raptor’s wing and rushed over to meet her friends as they hurried towards the crash site. Alyssa and Helene were both unscathed, but the third girl in the group drew her full attention. Irillith was unconscious and being carried by floating telekinetic hands, her armour covered in a patchwork of impact craters. The white plating had turned almost black with scorch marks, indicating she’d been shot from all directions.

“How badly is she hurt?” Rachel asked with concern as she ran up to check on Irillith.

“She’s taken a few nasty hits, but I don’t think any are life threatening,” Alyssa explained, while carefully placing the wounded Maliri on the ground. “Can I leave her with you? Dana’s been hurt too and I thought it would be easier to bring everyone here, rather than try to take all of you down to them.”

“Go... I’ll take care of her,” the young Doctor agreed, shooing her matriarch away.

Alyssa turned to face Helene. “Stay here with Rachel for a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Her teal-hued companion nodded. “Okay, see you soon.”

Activating flight mode, Alyssa launched herself into the air, borne aloft by her Paragon suit’s thrusters. From her elevated vantage point, she did a quick visual sweep of the ground, looking for any sign of more robotic troops. A squad of synthetic thralls caught her eye as she swooped overhead and Alyssa craned her neck around to watch them as she soared towards the temple. They were gathered behind the closest mound of rubble and looked like they’d been preparing to launch an attack, but all five had tipped over, legs and arms pointing stiffly towards the sky.

\*What happened with that last robot?\* she asked the brunette. \*I heard your thoughts; it sounded like it suddenly fell over?\*

\*It just locked up... like it had malfunctioned,\* Rachel replied.

\*Hmm, interesting... and how’s Irillith?\*

\*I’ve just finished scanning her. The inner layer of Irillith’s armour saved her life; she suffered several moderate gunshot wounds and was badly bruised from being hit at close-range. I’m just healing those injuries now and she’ll be fully recovered by the time she awakens.\*

\*What about the effects of the Mists?\* Alyssa asked with concern. \*Any long term damage?\*

\*There was significant trauma to her amygdala from massive overstimulation, which tracks with the autopsy reports we retrieved from Valada’s archive.\* There was a brief pause, then Rachel added hesitantly, \*Irillith’s brain activity seems relatively normal now though... it’s almost as if she’s having a relaxing afternoon nap, not teetering on the edge of insanity. Based on her level of exposure, she should be hyperactive and raving incoherently at this stage.\*

\*Helene managed to calm Irillith down and put her to sleep. Have a chat with her, she might be able to explain exactly what she did.\*

\*Alright, will do.\*

Alyssa had nearly reached the pyramid and from her position flying high above the ground, she could see the shocking extent of the destruction Dana had unleashed. An enormous sinkhole had opened up in the ground to the north and swallowed the huge building almost in its entirety. The black hole had sucked in the bulk of the ancient edifice, gouging a massive pit in the surface of Kythshara.

Descending into the gaping hole, Alyssa could see open tunnels in the side of the crevasse, the passageways exposed by the inexorable pull of the singularity. Hundreds of tons of rock had been torn from the cliff face, exposing the subterranean base and making it look like gleaming fossils embedded in the cavern’s flanks. Some of those corridors had been partially ripped away and Alyssa saw more Mael’nerak murals, like those on the wall that had briefly blocked her rescue of Irillith.

She zoomed in on the shattered maze as she floated past, studying a section of the wall that had been torn open. Inside were robotic figures slumped in haphazard piles, their weapons still clenched in their mechanical grip. With the question of what had ambushed Irillith finally answered, she dropped lower, searching for John and the girls.

The shoulder lamps from her suit reflected off glinting shapes in the darkness, shapes which quickly became identifiable as her missing friends. Alyssa dropped the final distance and fell into John’s arms, hugging him fiercely.

“I knew it was a big mistake letting you go running off alone!” she declared half-seriously, despite her beaming grin of relief.

“You were right,” he admitted, hugging her back.

Pulling off her helmet, she gave him a heated kiss before turning to smile at Tashana. “I’m so glad you’re okay. We got to Irillith just in time and I think she’s going to be alright.”

“Thank you,” the Maliri said, the worried look on her face starting to ease.

“How’s Sparks?” the blonde asked, crouching beside her friend.

“She’s still unconscious, but her pulse is steady and she’s breathing okay,” John replied, kneeling down to scoop the redhead up into his arms.

Alyssa made a quick gesture and a dozen telekinetic hands surrounded them. “I know your Paragon suits are wrecked; I’ll just carry you back to Rachel.”

He nodded his assent, then they rose into the air beside Alyssa. John and Tashana were quiet as they soared skyward, their gaze sweeping over the walls of the massive room that Dana had emptied so efficiently. They both noticed the exposed tunnels as they ascended, with John in particular staring at the concealed machinery in fascination.

“The walls were able to rotate and altered the layout of the corridors,” Alyssa explained, seeing his quizzical expression. “There were also robot thralls hidden inside.”

John frowned in confusion. “I looked through the walls, but I didn’t notice them at all.”

“Mael’nerak had to have anticipated you doing that. He probably had the robots stored in pieces until it was time to attack, so a Progenitor wouldn’t recognise them as a threat.”

“He basically turned Kythshara into a lethal Progenitor trap,” he stated, turning to look at the blonde for her opinion.

“Yeah, it seems painfully obvious now,” she agreed with a strained smile. “Mael’nerak must have created the Mists to keep thralls out and force a Progenitor to investigate on his own. If they’re all as arrogant as Larn’kelnar turned out ot be, they’d never have suspected they could be in any danger, not until it was way too late. Everything about this place was designed to lure in, then isolate and eliminate an invading Progenitor.”

“He would have got me too,” John admitted, feeling grudging respect towards the man who had formerly claimed the Maliri. “If it hadn’t been for Tashana and Sparks, I never would’ve survived.”

“I know,” Alyssa said quietly, reaching out to touch his bare arm as if needing the physical contact to reassure herself that he was okay.

Tashana sucked in her breath when she saw the extent of the devastation that had befallen the city.

“Did the black hole trigger an earthquake?” she asked, gaping at the demolished buildings in dismay.

“Err no... not exactly,” Alyssa said, looking shifty. “The AI sent a second wave of robot thralls to kill us and they used the buildings as cover. Irillith needed me, so I couldn’t afford to waste time shooting it out with them; it was quicker to just flatten all the buildings they were hiding in.”

Looking conflicted, Tashana reluctantly nodded as she stared at the scenes of devastation.

“You sound confident that there was an AI involved,” John noted, as they soared towards the crash site.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure Dana was right,” Alyssa agreed, glancing at the unconscious redhead. “A few robots managed to survive the buildings being demolished, then they broke free of the rubble and tried to attack Rachel. She gunned them all down, except the last one, which locked up and froze before she could shoot it. I found a few more that had also been deactivated and it looked like it happened to the whole group at the same time.”

John nodded in understanding. “If they were operating individually, like the Collective, then they would’ve kept on fighting until we destroyed them all.”

“Which means Mael’nerak left an AI to maintain this city, control all these robot troops, and spring the trap on an invading Progenitor,” she interjected, jumping to the logical conclusion. “When the AI failed to kill you with that monster robot, it tried to blow you up by overloading the reactor.“

“But we stopped that explosion, leaving it with nothing else to throw at us.” John paused for a moment before glancing at Alyssa. “You think it destroyed itself rather than risk being captured?”

“It would explain why all the robot thralls suddenly stopped working.”

“Makes sense,” he said with a sigh of regret. John looked down at the teenager in his arms. “What a waste... we could’ve learned so much. Dana’s going to be upset.”

“Yeah, I know,” Alyssa said sadly, as she guided them down towards the wrecked Raptor.

Helene was standing watch on top of the gunship and she greeted them with a cheerful wave as they descended. Rachel rose to her feet and stood beside her patient while waiting for John and the girls to land.

“Oh no...” Tashana gasped, staring in shock at her sister’s horrifically battered armour.

As soon as she landed, the Maliri archaeologist sprinted over to kneel beside her twin.

“I’m so sorry...” she sobbed, her distraught gaze sweeping over the blood-spattered rents in Irillith’s armour. “I should never have left you!”

John crouched down and carefully laid Dana on the floor as Rachel hurried over to check on her girlfriend.

“How badly hurt is she?” he asked the worried doctor.

The redhead was already enveloped in a grey mist as Rachel quickly diagnosed her condition. “Physical exhaustion and extreme mental fatigue...” she murmured, searching for any signs of permanent damage to Dana’s brain. “It looks like a typical case of psychic over-exertion, but it was probably exacerbated by her exposure to the Mists.”

Alyssa squatted down beside them. “I fed her as much power as I dared to help maintain that black hole. Sparks didn’t show any signs of distress until she collapsed right at the end. Is she going to be alright?”

Rachel nodded. “I think so. I’ve healed her as much as I safely can... but now she just needs to rest.”

John slipped a comforting arm around Tashana’s shoulder as the Maliri wept tears of regret. “What about Irillith?”

“She’s absolutely fine now,” the brunette replied, her voice gentle and reassuring. “Irillith was wounded several times, but I’ve healed all her injuries.”

“What about her mind?” Tashana asked, brushing the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. “How badly was she affected by the Mists? Irillith started to have a breakdown before she fled...”

“I was expecting her mental state to have severely deteriorated, but your sister couldn’t be healthier.” Raising a hand to forestall any further questions, the youthful doctor continued, “I can’t claim any credit for restoring Irillith’s sanity; that was all Helene’s remarkable handiwork.”

The teal-hued mermaid slid down the Raptor’s wing to join them, and smiled self-consciously when she heard Rachel’s glowing praise.

“Thank you for saving her!” Tashana blurted out, throwing her arms around the Abandoned girl and giving her a profoundly grateful hug.

“All I did was stop Irillith from being washed away,” Helene explained, returning the embrace. “The Mists had really worn her down; she just needed some help to rebuild what she’d lost.”

Tashana looked bewildered by her explanation, but quickly recovered and gave her friend a gentle kiss. “Whatever you did... thank you.”

John straightened up and glanced at Jade’s frozen form through the cockpit window. “How about Jade? Did you figure out what happened to her?”

Rachel hesitated and looked at him with a worried frown. “I performed a diagnostic check to see if I could identify what might’ve triggered such an extreme reaction. Physically, Jade seemed to be fine... until I looked at her crystal heart.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?!” he asked sharply.

“It’s been... activated... for want of a better word,” Rachel explained, choosing her words carefully. “The Achonin glyphs appear to have engaged now; they’re glowing and have started to shift position around the crystal.”

“Can we reverse the process and shut them down?”

She gave him a look of helpless frustration. “I’d love to... but I have no idea how they work. I can’t decipher Achonin script and I don’t know what the intention was behind the glyphs.”

Alyssa stood beside John and gently clasped his hand. “I want to help Jade as much as you do, but we’re not going to achieve anything by standing around in the street. Calara’s asking permission to enter the system and land the Invictus on Kythshara. When they get here, we can bring Jade aboard and Rachel can give her a thorough examination in the Medical Bay.”

“Are you absolutely sure the orbital defences have been deactivated?” he asked with concern.

“No, but we do know the Mists have been shut down, so the girls can enter the system safely. Calara suggested a cautious approach towards one of the known gun emplacements. If it is still active, she can engage it with the Invictus’ full complement of guns at maximum range. If the turret starts to overwhelm her shields, she’ll retreat and wait for them to regenerate before trying again. It might take some time, but she’s confident that she can use brute force to safely clear a path to Kythshara.”

John considered it for a moment, his gaze turning skyward.

“I don’t think we’ve got any choice, John,” Alyssa added quietly. “The Raptor’s wrecked and we’re stuck here until help arrives.”

“Alright, tell her to proceed... but be careful.”

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Jehanna paced nervously on the Combat Bridge, her gaze fixed on the holographic map of the nebula. “I don’t know how you can stand all this waiting around. I’ve always hated stakeouts... but knowing John and the girls are in trouble makes it ten times worse!”

Calara and Sakura exchanged wry smiles.

“It comes with being part of the Bridge crew,” Calara explained, turning her chair to watch the agitated reporter. “I worry every time they go into combat, but that doesn’t actually help anyone. I just focus on performing my role to the best of my ability... it’s the most effective way I can contribute to the success of the mission.”

Sakura walked over to Jehanna and clasped her hand, forcing the dusky girl to stop. “Try to relax, Jehanna. I suspect the worst of the danger is over now.”

She frowned and studied the former assassin. “I am trying. I don’t know how you can stay so calm.”

“I trust John to protect the girls and I know they’ll do everything they can to protect him,” the Asian girl explained. “You’ll be coming with us on ground missions in the future, so you’ll get to experience it for yourself. Don’t worry, we’ll be reunited with them soon.”

With perfect timing, Alyssa’s telepathic voice echoed through their minds. \*John’s approved the rescue plan. Head in-system, ladies.\*

Calara sighed with relief and turned to the tiger-striped Nymph sitting in the pilot’s chair. “Okay, take us in, Leylira. I’ll modify the flight path so we head directly towards the closest gun emplacement.”

“Affirmative, Captain Fernandez,” she replied respectfully, turning the flight stick towards the heart of the star system and ramping up the throttle.

“Just Calara is fine,” the Latina said, smiling at her pilot.

Jehanna gazed in fascination at the holographic map of the star system, watching as the model of the Invictus responded to Leylira’s deft touch. The warship’s six Trankaran engines blazed to life and the battlecruiser executed a smooth turn, pivoting around to enter the purple nebula. As they raced towards Kythshara, a glowing green flight path appeared, the route slightly altering their course towards the location of the closest turret.

“It won’t be long before we’re asked for the password that will let us approach the planet,” Calara advised the Nymph. “When we receive the incoming hail, slow our approach until I tell you to stop. If we come under fire before then, make evasive manoeuvres and retreat to a safe distance.”

Leylira nodded in compliance. “Alright, I understand.”

The tiger-striped nymph had always been very gentle with Jehanna, but watching her now, she could see that Leylira was tensed and ready for action. There was an excited predatory gleam in her amber eyes, her senses heightened in anticipation of the coming battle.

Several anxious minutes ticked by as the Invictus proceeded deeper into the star system, with the crew watching the map for any sign of the ancient defence towers.

“I can see debris, Calara,” Neysa called out in warning, as she pointed towards the system map.

There was a faint flicker at the edge of their sensor range, which had been significantly reduced with the interference of the nebula. As the Invictus drew closer, the signal data became clearer, and the debris was identified as the wreck of a Maliri destroyer.

“Get ready, Leylira,” Calara said quietly, waiting for the hail.

Time seemed to drag as they waited, but the comms interface stayed silent.

“We’ve passed the point where the Raptor was contacted,” Sakura said, keeping careful track of their progress. “Does that mean the defence grid is already on alert, or has the AI shutdown also deactivated the weapon emplacements?”

“Let’s proceed onwards and find out,” the Latina replied.

Calara zoomed in on the devastated remains of the destroyer as they drew level with the wreckage and studied the dozens of impact sites along its hull. She expanded her view of the holographic map, then tracked the vectors of those shots back to their source.

“Change course to heading 034 please, Leylira.”

The Nymph banked the Invictus to starboard and proceeded onwards into the murky nebula.

“We should be picking up something on the sensors by now,” Sakura muttered, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Do you think it’s cloaked?”

“It’s highly likely,” Calara agreed. “Mael’nerak must have been incredibly familiar with that technology after having access to it for countless thousands of years. Constructing a cloaking device for a fixed weapon emplacement would be an easy task for him, I’d imagine.”

Despite heading directly towards the suspected location of the turret, nothing appeared on the holographic map, their sensors unable to detect any trace of it. Calara was about to give up the search and set course for Kythshara, when Betrixa’s excited squeak echoed around the Bridge.

“There it is! I found it!” she gasped, springing up from her seat behind the Comms station and pointing frankly at a holographic screen. “Check out external camera 46!”

“Hold position, Leylira,” Calara ordered the Nymph pilot, then tapped several icons on her console.

The camera footage reappeared on the main screen, giving them a clear view of the gun emplacement. It hung motionless in space, several hundred metres off their starboard bow, the gleaming white making it stand out against the muted purple background. The base was six-sided, like a hexagonal dinner plate that was thickest in the centre, with weapons bristling over the numerous hardpoints.

The turret’s primary guns were ensconced in a pair of massive weapon turrets, one on the top and the other mounted on the bottom. Each gun barrel was nearly twice the length of the Raptor, and the lights glowing along the side revealed that the weapons still had power, although they were not currently tracking in their direction. Around the periphery of the hexagonal baseplate, smaller turrets could be seen at each angular edge, the barrels all pointing towards Kythshara.

“What type of weapons do you think they are?” Sakura asked quietly.

Calara studied the ancient guns with a hungry gleam in her eyes. “I don’t know... but I intend to find out. Mael’nerak must have designed that weapon emplacement to be a threat to an invading Progenitor, no matter what class of ship he approached in. If I was defending Kythshara from assault, those smaller, fast-tracking turrets would need to be powerful enough to stop a cloaked shuttle... and those big guns must hit hard enough to damage a dreadnought!”

\*You can play with your new toys later,\* Alyssa playfully chastised the brunette. \*It sounds like shutting down the AI deactivated the defence grid too, so you should be able to safely approach Kythshara. I’m going to ask Leylira to fly directly above the city and bring the Invictus down to 20,000 feet; she should be able to handle that with no problems. I’ll meet you there and land the Invictus myself.\*

\*We’re on our way!\* Calara replied, her heart fluttering with joy at the prospect of being reunited with John and Alyssa.

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The midday sun shone through the leafy canopy that surrounded the administration complex on Brecken’s World, casting green spears of light down into the courtyard below. The sunlight gently warmed Lucyna’s face as she stood on a balcony overlooking proceedings, and she watched with amusement as Governor Stefan Vaughn yelled orders at his men. They were busy heaving a thick roll of red carpet onto the back of a logging truck, but for the second time that afternoon, it rolled off the other side and landed in the mud.

A handsome man strolled out of the administration building to join Lucyna, his perfectly tailored suit making him look more like a male model than the Governor of Tasmaris Prime.

“Oh my, what a glorious day,” he noted, leaning against the railing and tilting his head back to enjoy the bright sunlight. Turning a disarming smile in her direction, he continued, “You don’t have any objections to me basking in your glorious presence do you, Governor Novitsky? If you’d prefer to be alone, just say the word and I’ll depart... my heart forever broken by a fair maiden’s cold rejection.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “Does that flowery shit ever work?”

“What lovely lady hasn’t dreamt of being whisked away from her humdrum existence and wooed by a handsome prince?”

“Ain’t you gettin’ a little old for the man-whore routine, Bryce?” she said with a disapproving scowl.

He placed his hand over his heart and gave her a look of mock indignation. “Too old?! Ouch! You wound me, Luce.”

“Yeah, right. Your hide’s thicker than a bull elephant’s.”

“That’s not the first time I’ve been favourable compared with an elephant,” he said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. “Some might think that having a six-foot penis would be somewhat of a hindrance... but I’ve never had any complaints.”

She burst into guffaws and shook her head. “It’s good to see you again, Bryce. When did you arrive?”

“Just this morning,” he replied, pleased to see she was still capable of laughter, despite everything she’d recently endured. Nodding with his chin towards the courtyard, he continued, “I see they’re rolling out the red carpet for someone. I don’t recall receiving such a lavish welcome from Stefan, did you?”

“Nah, but I’d have been pissed if he did,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I thought this was supposed to be a clandestine meeting... all cloak and dagger?”

“Perhaps his latest guest warrants special attention?” Bryce suggested, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He turned to face Lucyna again and gave her a broad smile. “Now tell me... do you have any plans for today?”

“Nah, I’m just kickin’ my heels until the rest of Vaughn’s guests pitch up. Why? Whaddya have in mind?”

“I thought we might go on a fun little excursion to while away the time. Have you ever gone fishing before?”

“Fishin’?” she asked incredulously. “You... wanna go fishin’?!”

“We have the perfect weather for it,” he said, glancing up at the cheery sunshine.

“Ugh... go on then. I guess it beats bein’ stuck indoors all day,” she grumbled.

“Marvellous!” he gushed, clapping his hands together with genuine enthusiasm. “I’m going to change into more appropriate attire. Shall we reconvene outside the starport in thirty minutes?”

“Yeah, okay. I packed my gumboots in case Vaughn wanted us to go on a hike through the woods. I remember how muddy it gets out there.”

“Ah, very wise, Lucyna,” Bruce said, pushing himself away from the railings. “Well, I’ll see you shortly then.”

“Right-oh,” she replied cheerfully, actually looking forward to the trip.

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Alyssa carefully levitated Jade onto a flouting gurney as her sisters looked on with anxious eyes.

“Please could you take Jade to the Medical Bay,” Rachel requested. “I’ll join you as soon as I’ve removed my armour.”

“Of course,” Neysa said, nodding towards Marika who began guiding the gurney towards the Invictus’ airlock. “Thank you, Doctor Voss.”

“There’s no need for that... I love her too,” the tawny-haired girl said, watching Jade disappear inside.

“I’ll put these two to bed,” Alyssa said, as she walked past with Dana and Irillith cradled in her telekinetic embrace. “See you soon.”

Daphne waited politely until they had all travelled through the airlock, then she walked outside to join John.

“I’m very relieved to see you are unharmed, father,” she said, before her perceptive eyes flicked to his bare forearm. “What happened to your vambrace? Your armour looks severely damaged, but your limb is intact.”

He flexed his fingers and grimaced. “It was a close call, Daphne. My arm wasn’t looking too good twenty minutes ago.”

She stepped closer and gently touched his hand. “I’m very sorry that you and your friends were hurt. Is there anything that the Collective can do to assist?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I don’t think so.” John glanced back at the wrecked gunship. “We need to recover the Raptor, but I can’t deal with that now. I’ll come back and move it into the hangar later.”

“You can leave the recovery operation to us,” Daphne volunteered. “I have full access to the Invictus’ tractor beams, so recovering the wreckage will be quite a straightforward procedure.”

“That’d be a big help. Thanks a lot, honey.”

She stood on tiptoe and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. “You look weary, father. You should rest.”

“Yeah, I feel it,” he agreed, the psychic regeneration of his arm taking its toll.

Returning her wave goodbye, John entered the Invictus through the airlock and strode across the Secondary Hangar to the express grav-tubes. He’d lost all power to his Paragon suit, so it felt clunky and unresponsive, the servos all fried by the electrical surge. When he stepped out of the anti-gravity field into the Armoury on Deck Four, he was surprised to find Calara, Sakura, and Jehanna waiting for him with multi-tools at the ready.

“We thought you might need help with your amour,” Sakura explained. “Alyssa said you might have some trouble taking it off.”

“Thanks, girls,” John said gratefully.

“Plus, the sooner we can get you out of that tin can, the quicker we can have a proper hug,” Calara added, giving him a warm smile.

“I could really do with one of those too,” he said with a tired chuckle.

Following their instructions, he held up his arms to give them better access to his armour. Their multi-tools whirred and clicked as they unfastened bolts and clasps, deftly removing battered armour plating from his body.

“I think this locking mechanism is jammed on the right side,” Jehanna said, glaring at the dented breastplate with a frown.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. I had a 50 ton robot jumping up and down on me,” John said, nodding his thanks to Sakura as she removed his left pauldron. “Let me give it a try.”

He gripped the armour at the joint above his waist and heaved as hard as he could. The broken mechanism made a grinding screech as the metal bent under the strain, then the two halves broke apart, to fall to the deck with a clang. As soon as he was freed from the last piece of armour, John was immediately surrounded in a four-way embrace with him at the centre.

“We all heard what happened,” Jehanna said, hugging him tight. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Calara stroked his arm, which was still covered in dried blood at the elbow where the limb had been brutally severed. “I remember what it was like. You must have been in agony...”

“I don’t think either of us want to go through that again,” he said, pulling her closer for a kiss.

Sakura nuzzled into him from behind as she watched their tender embrace. “Alyssa thought you might want to freshen up while Rachel’s scanning Jade. Do you want some company in the shower?”

John nodded without breaking the kiss, his arm reaching back to stroke Sakura’s supple thigh when she pressed herself against him. Reluctantly the quartet broke apart, then they took the express grav-tube up to the Commander’s quarters, where John was quickly stripped of his torn jumpsuit. The three girls removed their own clothing on the way into the shower and John was soon moaning with pleasure as they soaped down his aching muscles.

“That feels amazing,” he said with a contented sigh.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Jehanna murmured as she stroked his chest. “When Alyssa lost contact with you and the girls, I was terrified that something awful had happened. Actually, the whole time we were apart was nerve-racking... the mission sounded like it was one disaster after the other.”

“We were very lucky not to lose anyone,” John admitted, opening his eyes to see three worried faces gazing back at him. “I just hope Jade’s going to be okay.”

“Do you have any idea what happened to her?” Calara asked, anxiously nibbling at her lower lip.

He shook his head with a rueful frown. “Nobody does... and that’s what’s worrying me. Rachel said that the Achonin runes on Jade’s crystal heart have been ‘activated’. I think we should take a look at them and try to figure out where we go from here.”

The girls were quiet as they finishing showering together, their thoughts preoccupied with Jade. They all dressed quickly, then hurried along the corridor to the grav-tubes, where they descended to Deck Seven. When John opened the door into the Medical Bay, he saw that the rest of the girls were already there, watching Rachel as she operated the medi-scanner.

Alyssa held out her hand towards him and they intertwined their fingers as he stood beside her. “We just moved Jade into the scanner. It won’t take long for us to see a visual of her heart.”

Jehanna gasped when she saw the Nymph matriarch’s terrified expression. “Oh my god! What on Terra could’ve made her react like that?!”

“I’ve no idea,” John said quietly, slipping an arm around her shoulders and giving her a supportive sideways hug.

Removing Jade’s clenched hand from the flight stick had been a very laborious process. John was the only one strong enough to loosen her supernaturally enhanced grip, but he had to be extremely careful not to use too much force for fear of breaking her fingers. After painstakingly removing her hands from the Raptor’s controls, they were still curled into claws, and now it looked like Jade was frantically trying to defend herself from some horrific foe. It hurt just to look at her in this dreadful state.

“There it is,” Rachel murmured, stepping aside so they could all see the holographic display. “Jade’s crystal heart.”

The Nymph’s vital organ was shaped as a hexagonal prism and the image rotated slowly in the air so it could be seen from all angles. Every facet was covered in strange and unfamiliar glyphs, the ancient icons now glowing with a sinister amber light.

“These runes have shifted position,” the brunette explained, tapping buttons on the control interface. “This is what they looked like before they activated.”

She brought up another set of images, which had been taken during the autopsy she’d performed on Jade shortly after her death. John could see the difference at once. The runes had rotated and changed alignment, with the haphazard symbols now forming a rigidly ordered sequence. Even looking at the Achonin glyphs set his teeth on edge and he shuddered with a disquieting sense of revulsion.

“The rest of the Nymphs have been unaffected by their proximity to Kythshara, but I performed another diagnostic check on them, just to be thorough,” the meticulous doctor said, glancing at Jade’s sisters. “There was no trace of these glyphs on their hearts previously and that’s still the case now. I think it’s safe to say that Jade is the only one that has been modified by the Achonin.”

“Alright. How do we get rid of them?” he asked, his gaze flicking from the glyphs to Rachel.

The doctor was nibbling at her nail as she gazed at the images with intense concentration. “The only thing I know with absolute certainty, is that examining these runes makes me feel deeply unsettled.”

“Me too,” Alyssa said, suppressing an involuntary shudder.

The rest of the girls all quickly agreed, echoing her sentiments.

Racking his brain for any possible solution, John blurted out, “Dana had a look at the Achonin runes in the Underworld... Is there any chance that she might be able to tell us more?”

Rachel hesitated, then shook her head. “We can ask her, but I doubt it. There were only a few simple icons displayed on those computers the pirates were using, so expecting Dana to translate an intricate sequence like this is out of the question.”

Tashana grimaced as she stared at the alien runes. “The Underworld is just an Achonin fuel refinery. I’m sure that the only reason it’s still left standing is because Mael’nerak dismissed it as being inconsequential. I only mention this to put the facility into proper perspective; us hoping to find an answer there, is like expecting to find detailed instructions on genetic cloning in an Outer Rim gas station.”

Calara cleared her throat, but then stayed silent, and when John glanced her way he saw a horribly conflicted expression on her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked with concern.

“Just go ahead and tell him,” Alyssa said, her voice pained. “It needs saying, even if we don’t want to hear it.”

The Latina took a deep breath, then reluctantly said, “If there’s no guarantee we’ll find any answers in the Underworld, then that means scouring the Unclaimed Wastes for other Achonin facilities that might have survived. It would take us two days to fly there, several more looking for other sites, then two days to return to Kythshara. That’s all time that we can’t afford to waste, not when we should be focused on retrieving Larn’kelnar’s thrall fleets.”

Her announcement was met with shocked silence.

“But... it’s Jade!” Betrixa blurted out, looking at the Latina incredulously. “We have to help her!”

“I know...” Calara said, her shoulders sagging. “If I was following my heart, I’d say to drop everything and do whatever it takes to get Jade the help she needs. I just... needed to remind all of you what’s at stake.”

“It’s alright, honey,” John said, walking over to embrace the distraught girl. “Jade would never want us to risk everything to help her.”

“We can’t leave her like that, Master!” Betrixa protested. “She’s terrified... and nothing scares us!”

“Actually, that’s not true, Betrixa,” Neysa interjected, her tone grim and foreboding. “How would you react if you were forced to betray our Master... or even worse, made to harm him?”

The blonde shapeshifter gaped at her sister in horror, her look of consternation mirrored by the rest of the Nymphs.

“Oh, Jade...” Helene murmured with sympathy, reaching out to stroke her hair.

“All of you are right,” John said, moving over to stand beside the medical bed and gaze down at his devoted Nymph. “We can’t leave Jade like this and we can’t afford to waste days roaming around the Unclaimed Wastes searching for answers that might no longer exist. That means we need to do something to help her now.”

“Shall I wake Dana and ask her to take a look at the runes?” Alyssa asked with a worried frown. “I don’t think we should disturb Irillith though, she’s been through too much and needs to rest.”

“No, let them both sleep. Dana only glanced at a few icons on the Underworld computers and Irillith wasn’t able to interact with the Achonin systems. They won’t be able to tell us anything useful from that.” His attention shifted to Helene as he continued, “What can you tell me about Jade’s mind? Can you get a reading of her emotions?”

The Abandoned girl closed her eyes and reached out towards her stricken friend, attempting to make contact with Jade’s mind. She was able to touch the periphery of the Nymph’s subconscious, but it was like being in contact with the cold hard rock she’d visualised when they were besieged by the Mists.

“Nothing... nothing at all,” Helene finally said, her voice forlorn. “It’s like her mind has been completely sealed away.”

“By the Achonin runes, or Jade herself?” Rachel asked, listening attentively.

“I’m sorry... I don’t know.”

“That’s okay, it’s important to rule out all possibilities,” John said, before turning to face Alyssa. “Are you able to make telepathic contact with her?”

“I’ve tried several times already and ran into exactly the same problem as Helene,” the blonde admitted with a frustrated sigh. “Jade’s mind is locked up tight... I wasn’t able to make any connection at all.”

He nodded, as if expecting her reply. “I guess that leaves us only one last option. I’ll try to make telepathic contact with her myself.”

Calara frowned in confusion. “I thought Alyssa was a much stronger telepath than you?”

“I am... except when one of you is loaded up,” the blonde said, looking at John with admiration. “You’re thinking about what happened with Lilyana?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Jehanna glanced at each of them in turn. “Why? What happened?”

“I tried to shield a Maliri Fleet Commander’s mind when she swallowed down a full load of John’s cum. He doesn’t like seeing new girls getting overwhelmed when he feeds them for the first few times, so I thought he’d enjoy it more if I could stop her from going into the trance. It didn’t work... he just swatted me aside like a bug. When he gives any of you a full tummy, I’ve got no chance in hell of coming between the two of you.”

The Indian girl rubbed her slim stomach instinctively and shot John a hungry look.

\*Can I suggest Tashana?\* Alyssa advised him. \*She needs some time alone with you.\*

\*Of course.\* John caught the heated glance from Jehanna and gave her an apologetic smile. “Not this time, gorgeous. I need to debrief Tashana on the mission.”

Sakura giggled, then blushed furiously with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, I couldn’t help it. I know how serious everything is right now... it was just such an appropriate description.”

“Nothing like a good double entendre to ease some of the tension,” Alyssa said with an understanding smile.

John held out his hand to the Maliri girl. “Come on, let’s go have a chat.”

Tashana blushed at being the centre of attention but eagerly interlaced her fingers with his. They left the Medical Bay together and walked back along the corridor towards the grav-tubes, where they stepped into the glowing blue field. The Maliri archaeologist was quiet as they ascended up through the decks, only glancing at John when they reached Deck Three to see if he wanted to disembark for the Observatory.

He gently squeezed her hand and stayed within the grav-tube. “I don’t want to disturb Dana or your sister.”

She nodded her understanding and waited until they reached Deck Two, then they walked along the corridor to her quarters. Tashana gave him a strained smile, then led the way into the bedroom.

“This is about Irillith, isn’t it?” she asked, as she turned on some muted lighting. “You want to talk about how I reacted earlier... when I saw what happened to her.”

John caught her completely off-guard as he deftly gathered her in his arms and dipped her for a passionate kiss. Her angular eyes widened in surprise as his lips pressed against hers, then she melted into the embrace and let out a lusty moan. He picked her up and carried Tashana to the bed, where he gently placed her on the covers without breaking the kiss. She curled her leg around him when John joined her, whimpering softly into his mouth as she writhed against his stiffening length.

“Actually, I wanted to thank you,” he murmured, between tender kisses. “You saved my life, Tashana. A few more seconds and it would’ve all been over...”

She pulled back and her gaze softened, looking up at him with sympathy. “I was so scared when I saw how badly you’d been hurt.” Caressing his left hand, she brought it to her lips and gently kissed each of his regenerated fingers. “You must’ve been in agony...”

He stroked her cheek and marvelled at how ravishing she looked in that moment. All the Maliri he’d met were very attractive, but Tashana and her sister were exceptionally beautiful, like an identical pair of flawless sapphires that were the centrepiece in a collection of priceless jewels. The twins had inherited their mother’s stunning good looks, and were blessed with heart-shaped faces and delicate features, their enchanting violet eyes perfectly complementing their sky-blue complexion.

However, it was the look of adoration in Tashana’s loving gaze that captivated him now, rather than just her raw physical beauty. John felt the purity of her connection to him, a loving bond that she’d honoured in the most dramatic way possible, when she’d risked her own life to protect his.

“I thought I was a dead man,” he admitted, feeling a shiver run down his spine as he remembered those blood-soaked blades descending towards his chest. “Then you appeared from out of nowhere. You just leapt straight into the fight, desperate to distract it so that I could escape. It was one of the bravest things I’ve ever seen.”

Tashana almost seemed to glow as she basked in his earnest praise, then she pulled him down for a heated kiss, the flame of passion burning in her eyes.

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Lucyna whistled a merry tune to herself as she stomped down the street in her rubber waders, feeling happier than she had in weeks. Bryce was right, it was a beautiful day, and she was glad to be distracted from all of the dangerous talk about rebellions and T-Fed reprisals.

There was a lot of traffic on the roads in Valley Falls city, with an influx of traders drawn to the capital by the dozens of spacecraft that had recently landed at the starport. As she neared the main transit hub into Brecken’s World, Lucyna noticed another new arrival from one of their neighbouring star systems. The gleaming passenger liner shone brightly in the sunlight, the brand new luxury transport looking out of place amongst the worn buildings of Valley Falls.

She was so distracted by the shiny spacecraft, that she almost bumped into Bryce at the starport’s entrance.

“That’s an adorable outfit, Luce,” he said with admiration. “A very bold choice.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile, which faded when she turned to look at her fellow governor.

Bryce Hansen had also changed, but he was now wearing another beautifully tailored suit in a slightly lighter shade of grey.

Lucyna looked at him in utter bewilderment. “You’re plannin’ to go fishin’ in that fancy get up?”

He nodded and gestured behind her into the starport. “It looks like Stefan has already made an impressive start and landed a very big fish. Isn’t that Anastasia Volkov? I believe she’s the current governor of Lithotania, and as I’m sure you know, that’s the richest star-system this side of Port Heracles. I thought it would be neighbourly to greet the good governor and make a favourable first impression.”

“You fuckin’ asshole!” Lucyna hissed, turning scarlet with embarrassment. “How can I meet her lookin’ like this?! I look like a freakin’ hillbilly!”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll appreciate your rustic charm,” he said, trying to stifle his grin and failing miserably.

Steam was practically pouring out of her ears as she glared at her soon-to-be-deceased former friend.

Lucyna was about to launch into a furious tirade when she paused, an odd look on her face. “You know what... fuck it. I ain’t puttin’ on airs and graces for no one. I had enough of that shit when we were kowtowin’ to the high and mighty Terran Federation.”

She turned and marched into the starport, leaving Bryce stunned at her sudden about-face.

“Wait, Luce!” he called after her, hurrying to catch up. “It was just a joke! The introductions are at the formal reception this afternoon!”

“Nah, screw that,” Lucyna muttered, not to be deterred. “We won’t get a word in edgewise with everyone swarmin’ around her like flies on shit.”

“Oh God...” Bryce groaned, holding his head in his hands.

Lucyna nodded to the startled guards, who recognised her after doing a double-take and waved her through. Governor Stefan Vaughn was trying his very best to make a good impression on the beautiful and elegant Governess Volkov, who was listening to him politely as he talked about her homeworld in glowing terms.

Marching up the red carpet to the pair, Lucyna stuck her thumbs in her belt and stood defiantly before them. “Afternoon, ma’am! Ah’m here tah welcome you tuh Brecken’s World!”

The new arrival took one astonished look at Lucyna in her eclectic outfit and burst into laughter.

“Lucyna?!” Stefan gasped, his eyes bulging as he glared at her in consternation. “What the hell are you doing?”

He’d been working his hardest to convince the Lithotanian governess that the rebellious colonies could become a serious rival to the Terran Federation. Then Lucyna appeared, reinforcing every negative stereotype the Core Worlds believed about the inhabitants of the Outer Rim.

“Oh, Luce, you are a character,” Anastasia said fondly. “It feels good to have something to laugh about in these times of sorrow. Thank you so much.”

“It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Ana,” Lucyna replied, moving closer to give her a friendly hug. “How are Nikolay and your girls?”

They walked away together, leaving Stefan staring at the pair in astonishment as the old friends caught up. Lucyna gave Bryce a beatific smile as they walked past the stunned governor, and Anastasia never saw Luce flipping him the bird behind her back.

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“Oh John, I love you so much,” Tashana cooed in his ear, as they moved together in perfect harmony.

He could feel her pussy clutching him as she crested towards an orgasm, then she threw her head back and cried out in ecstasy. John continued stroking into her with a smooth rhythm, relishing the feel of her silky thighs wrapped tight around his waist. Even though she was a strong, athletic woman, he was able to easily overpower her constricting grip, taking her with deep pistoning thrusts. Every time he fully sheathed himself inside the mewling Maliri, the head of his cock brushed the back of her womb, the deeply intimate contact heightening her pleasure.

“You’re so sexy when you cum,” he whispered in her pointed ear, before pulling back to gaze into her heavy-lidded eyes. “I love everything about it... the way you sound, the way you look, the way you feel...”

Tashana panted for breath after her fourth glorious climax and looked up at him in adoration. “You’re so good to me, Baen’thelas. I don’t know what I ever did to deserve you...”

As they shared a tender kiss, John heard the door slide open behind him, followed by the faint sound of bare feet padding across the floor. He glanced to his right as the new arrival knelt on the bed and saw Neysa watching him with a curious expression of hopeful apprehension.

“We couldn’t wait any longer, Master,” she murmured, stroking his back. “Would it be alright if we joined you?”

He turned to look at Tashana for her approval and she consented with a languid smile.

“Hello kittens,” she said warmly as Ailita and Marika knelt beside her.

John pushed himself up on his arms to give them room and the two Nymphs leaned in to latch onto the Maliri’s dark blue nipples. Her eyelashes fluttered as their tongues lathed over Tashana’s sensitive flesh, the sensuous pair licking, sucking and gently biting her hardening buds.

“That feels amazing...” Tashana groaned appreciatively, running her fingers through their long hair as she held them to her breasts.

At the same time, two sets of soft hands began caressing John’s lower back and thighs, as he felt the other two Nymphs make their presence known. His calves were suddenly enveloped in lush cleavage, making him feel like he was totally surrounded by nubile women. Before he had a chance to adjust to that wonderful new sensation, two velvety tongues brushed over his quad, the tigress and cheetah catgirls worshipping his balls.

“Does that feel good, Master?” Neysa whispered in his ear, before licking the lobe.

He shivered with pleasure at the assault on his senses and nearly lost his balance as he tried to keep himself raised up above Ailita and Marika.

“Use my sisters to support you,” she purred seductively. “It’s what we’re all here for.”

Pushing himself upright, John readjusted his posture to a much more comfortable position, with his hands resting on their backs. “Is that okay?” he asked with concern, still reluctant to lean on them fully. “I’m not too heavy?”

Neysa laughed and gave him a fond kiss. “Oh, Master... you are adorable. Marika might act like a snugly teddy bear, but she’s as tough as a hovertank. Ailita hasn’t been with us long, but every time you fed her, you’ve poured your energy into making her as strong and tough as possible.”

As if to confirm her reassurances, Ailita and Marika turned to gently kiss his arms, their feline eyes watching him intently. It was obvious they weren’t in any distress, and as John relaxed and leaned on them for support, he felt their skin heat up in response. The position felt gloriously self-indulgent, with five horny Nymphs and one very satisfied Maliri all focused solely on his pleasure.

Neysa bit her lip and moaned wantonly in his ear. “You’ve been teasing us for hours, John. We’re all desperate to see you pump your cum into this beautiful mate and make her look like every Maliri noblewoman should... her belly swollen with your baby.”

Now it was John’s turn to groan, teetering on the edge as he listened to the Nymph’s raunchy monologue.

She ran her hand over Tashana’s flat stomach, caressing the bump his hefty cock made in her azure tummy. “I promise we’ll be so good to her when we lick her out afterwards...”

With thoughts of the Nymphs sucking his load out of Tashana, John cried out as he climaxed, thrusting hard into the panting girl splayed out beneath him. Soft hands and eager tongues massaged his quad, skilfully milking his balls of every last drop of cum. His orgasm went on and on, with John seeing stars as he flexed his last and fell into Neysa’s awaiting arms.

“Rest now, John,” she cooed, a mixture of pride and gratitude in her loving voice. “We’ll make sure our sister gets everything she needs.”

John was vaguely aware of being guided down onto the bed beside Tashana, as her appreciative moans reverberated around the bedroom. He had his hand resting on her curved stomach, so he could feel it slowly smooth out as the Nymphs sucked all his cum from her stretched womb. With their precious cargo obtained, the five catgirls each gave the comatose Maliri a grateful kiss, before turning to leave them both to recover.

“Wait, Neysa,” John called out, reaching for her hand. “Are you carrying some of my cum?”

“Yes, Master,” she replied, stroking her flat stomach. Split five ways between the Nymphs, she hadn’t swallowed enough to create a bump.

 “Come back to bed,” he requested. “I’m going to need your help.”

She looked at him quizzically as she slipped under the covers, but didn’t question his unusual orders. John patted her thigh with gratitude, then turned to spoon behind Tashana, who was reeling from the aftermath of so much pleasure.

“You did the right thing letting Irillith go,” he whispered in her ear, while holding her in his comforting arms. “You thought she’d be safe running away from the pyramid.”

Rousing from her daze, Tashana turned to look up at him, crystal tears pooling in her eyes. “If I’d stayed with her, I could have protected Irillith until help came.”

John slowly shook his head. “Dana and I would’ve both been killed if you hadn’t saved us... and you had no way of knowing Irillith would get hurt.”

“She was terrified and desperate for my help,” Tashana said, her expression full of guilt and remorse. “She’s my sister... and I feel like I failed her when she needed me the most.”

“But you both belong to me,” John gently reminded her, brushing aside a lock of hair and caressing her temple. “And I’ve rebuilt both your minds, Tashana. I know the pair of you more intimately than you could ever imagine. Irillith loves you with all her heart... and she’ll forgive you, because you did the only thing you could under horrible circumstances.”

She looked vulnerable and uncertain as she gazed up at him. “Are you really sure?”

“I promise,” he replied, with a reassuring smile. “Now just relax and get some rest. Irillith will probably wake up when you do, then everything will be just fine.”

Tashana let out a ragged sigh of relief, and snuggled into his embrace. “Thanks, John.”

“You were amazing today, honey,” he said, kissing her shoulder. “I’m very proud of you.”

She looked happy and contented as she fell asleep in his arms, all the tension easing from her beautiful face. John watched her for a few minutes until he was certain she was in a deep slumber, then carefully extricated himself and turned around.

“Thanks for staying, Neysa,” he said, meeting the curious look she was giving him.

“How can I be of assistance, John?” she asked respectfully.

“First of all, I want you to start absorbing the cum in your tummy,” he replied, brushing the backs of his fingers across her taut abdomen.

“But... what about-?!” she blurted out, before her strangled protest died on her lips.

Neysa hesitated for a second, gazing intently back at him, then a rippling pulse of light spread out from her stomach to spread out around her body. The warm hazel light matched the lovely shade of her eyes, and it swept along her limbs, the psychic energy empowering her and enhancing her lithe figure.

“I know you really wanted to save that for Jade. Did you follow my instructions because you felt compelled to obey me?” he asked, studying her anxious expression.

She slowly shook her head. “I trust you, Master. I know you love all of us very much... and if you ask me to do something, there must be a very good reason.”

“You’ve come so far, Neysa,” he said, feeling a surge of pride for the earnest shapeshifter. “I’m honoured that you trust me, and very glad you can start making decisions like that of your own free will.”

“This kind of obedience pleases you, Master?” she asked, her feline eyes sparkling with delight.

“Yes, it’s so much better,” he agreed. “You could actually teach a couple of my naughty matriarchs a useful thing or two.”

He could sense Alyssa’s amusement, but she managed to resist the urge to make a facetious quip.

Neysa laughed and nuzzled into him affectionately. After pressing herself as close to him as possible, she asked softly, “I assume you have a new idea about how to help Jade? An idea that requires the two of us to have an active psychic connection? If you tell me what you’re planning, I might be able to offer some insight regarding Nymph physiology.”

“This is why I asked for your help, Neysa... you’re a clever girl,” he replied, stroking her soft brown hair. “We know that the Achonin made some significant modifications to Jade. The glyphs on her heart are an obvious sign of their tampering, but we had clues long before that. Jade can remember centuries of abuse she suffered at the hands of her previous masters, whereas the rest of you seem to forget everything when you’re claimed by someone new.”

“So you want to examine the structure of my mind, then see if you can precisely identify what the Achonin altered in Jade?”

“Like I said... very clever,” John replied, nodding in confirmation.

She looked lost in thought for a moment. “It’s a good plan. Unfortunately, I can’t tell you anything insightful about the inner workings of my mind, but I can try to suppress any urge to resist mental intrusion. If I cooperate with you as fully as I’m able to, my subconscious should be totally exposed for you to study.”

“Perfect, thank you.”

Neysa wriggled closer, then rested her forehead against his as she gazed into his eyes. “This one is here to serve you, Master...”

John felt her mental defences come tumbling down, then Neysa’s mind unfolded before him like a book. To his astonishment, he realised that she wasn’t just responding to his tentative telepathic contact, it was almost like she was... *reporting*... to him. All her secrets were laid bare and in a moment of shocking epiphany, he finally knew precisely why the Nymphs had been created.

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“So how long have you known the esteemed Governess Volkov,” Bryce asked under his breath, as they waited for the rest of the Governors to take their places around the conference table.

“Just over eight years,” Lucyna admitted, smirking at his reaction. “There ain’t that many of us females holdin’ the position of Governor, so we decided to stick together and teach each other the ropes. I’ve spoken to Ana a bunch of times, but this is the first occasion we’ve actually met.”

“Well played, Luce; you nearly gave me a coronary,” Bryce admitted, inclining his head with respect. “I thought Stefan was going to crucify us when you marched up to his special guest like that. I think it’s fair to say that he’s got a lot riding on encouraging Lithotania to join our merry band of pioneers.”

“Pioneers?” She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. “Be careful, Bryce... don’t let yourself get sucked in by Vaughn’s highfalutin speeches about independence and freedom. If the Admiralty find out what he’s plannin’, they won’t be callin’ us pioneers. We’ll all be accused of treason and strung up as a traitors.”

“You don’t seriously believe that we’d be better off struggling under High Command’s bootheel?” Bryce asked, surprised by her negativity considering everything she’d been through at the hands of the Kirrix.

“I ain’t sayin’ that,” she replied, shaking her head. “Just... we need to be very careful. If the Admirals get wind of what we’re up to out here, heads will roll.”

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” Stefan Vaughn said, his amplified voice echoing around the conference room and getting everyone’s attention. “Before we start proceedings, I just want to thank all of you for attending. I’m well aware of what’s at stake and the risks you’re all taking in being here... but I promise you that it will be well worth your time.”

He glanced around the room and continued, “Now, you all know who I am, but you might not know each other. I think we should be up front about who we are and what worlds we represent. Just to start us off, I’m Stefan Vaughn, Governor of Brecken’s World these past twelve years.”

He passed the microphone to a stout man that Luce didn’t recognise, who was sitting on his right-hand side.

“Andros Petrides, Nerus IV,” the man said proudly. His perceptive gaze swept the room, gauging the other attendees’ reaction before he handed over the microphone to the next governor.

“That’s Stefan’s 600-pound tuna right there,” Bryce whispered to Lucyna, somehow managing to not move his lips.

She covered her mouth with her hand and muttered back, “Port Heracles?”

“Got it in one,” the Governor for Tasmaris Prime replied. “If Nerus IV secedes from the Terran Federation, it’ll be a huge blow to the Admiralty. As well as losing their primary trade hub for the Outer Rim, Port Heracles boasts the second biggest drydock and shipyard facilities outside Olympus.”

“There ain’t no way in hell High Command will give that up,” Lucyna scoffed.

“If they’re determined to leave, the Admiralty won’t have much choice,” Bryce countered. “I have it on very good authority that the Lion will intervene to protect us if necessary.”

Lucyna studied the Nerus IV governor, trying to get a measure of the man. “Why would he want to join us anyway? If Port Heracles is that important to the Admiralty, they must already be dumpin’ shitloads of credits into the system to keep everyone happy. The last thing they’d want is any trouble kickin’ off there.”

“It’s not always about the money, Luce,” Bryce said, joining her in watching the man. “Andros Petrides is currently a mid-tier governor aspiring to play with the big boys in the Core Worlds. If Nerus IV joins us, Port Heracles will become our primary shipyard and the source of all our defensive fleets. Petrides would instantly be promoted to one of the most powerful and influential men in Stefan’s new empire.”

She whistled quietly at that revelation, then turned to listen to the rest of the governors introduce themselves. Around the conference table sat thirty-two Outer-Rim governors, which included all the colonies that had been invaded by the Kirrix. There were more people standing in the room who were listening intently as the meeting unfolded, but Lucyna ignored them as she introduced herself, figuring that they were Stefan’s administrative staff taking notes.

To see so many colonies represented there was remarkable, and she looked at the Governor of Brecken’s World with newfound respect. She knew that Stefan was passionate about his aspirations to escape from Terra’s control, but to have convinced 32 governors to attend this conference, despite the huge personal stakes if they were caught, was a testimony to his eloquence. After everyone seated had introduced themselves, Lucyna was surprised when their host handed the microphone to the closest of the standing attendees.

The man cleared his throat and said, “I’m Munir Hussain. I’ve been the governor of Cicarus II for the previous two years. Thank you for inviting me.”

He gave the microphone to the tall man standing beside him, who also promptly identified himself as a planetary governor. Lucyna’s surprise shifted to astonishment when she realised everyone standing was a governor too, bringing the total to 57 rebellious star systems represented in that conference room.

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“Hey, sleepyhead, it’s time to wake up,” Rachel said quietly, as she rubbed her girlfriend’s shoulder.

Dana’s eyelashes fluttered open and her brow furrowed with irritation. “I feel like shit,” she grumbled, before pouting and pulling the covers over her head. “Go away! Let me sleep!”

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” the brunette said with genuine regret. “I would have let you wake up naturally, but it’s important; John needs to talk to all of us.”

“Why? What about?” the redhead asked, peeling back the duvet.

“It’s about the Nymphs. He didn’t want to repeat himself, so he’s going to tell all of us at once.” She brushed aside a stray lock of Dana’s auburn hair and continued, “How are you feeling? Are you in a lot of pain?”

She shook her head, then winced. “Nah... it’s more like a nasty hangover.”

“You really pushed yourself to the limit,” Rachel said, while reaching out to cover her friend with a healing aura. “We were all worried about you.”

Dana’s blue eyes darted around the bedroom, but she only saw Tashana kneeling beside Irillith.

Seeing the momentary flicker of disappointment in her expression, Rachel answered the teenager’s unspoken question. “Yes, John was fretting about you more than anyone. He would’ve been here for you when you woke up, but he needed to examine the rest of the Nymphs before the meeting.”

The redhead shuddered with relief as a soothing wave of healing energy swept through her mind, easing her discomfort. “He’s forgiven. The most important thing is fixing Jade.”

Tashana leaned down to kiss her sister on the cheek. “Irillith... can you hear me?” she whispered in her pointed ear. “John wants to speak with us.”

It took several seconds for Irillith to respond, then she stretched like a cat, a look of contentment on her face. She glanced up at her sister, then her expression froze in shock, as a procession of much darker emotions played across her features.

With her heart sinking in her chest, Tashana reached out to telepathically beg forgiveness from her twin, but was stunned to discover that Irillith had blocked her out. Both sisters broke eye contact, equally distraught but for very different reasons.

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John stood beside the tall windows that ran the length of the Briefing Room and stared out at the gleaming cityscape spread out before him. From this height aboard the Invictus, he had an impressive view of the ancient city and he couldn’t help wondering where the Imperial palace was located. Somewhere inside that imposing structure, was a lab where Mael’nerak had shaped the destinies of billions of people. It was the place where he’d created entirely new species, raised up new empires, and conspired to destroy others.

\*John, the twins are both very upset,\* Alyssa informed him, her worried voice derailing his train of thought.

\*What happened?\* he asked with surprise. \*I thought Tashana was fine now?\*

\*She was, but then her sister woke up. Irillith blocked us both out of her mind... and she’s obviously hiding something. Tashana instantly assumed that it was because Irillith blamed her for getting hurt by the robots, but I don’t think that’s it. Irillith was scared shitless when we found her, so I doubt she remembers much at all about what happened. There’s something else bothering her.\*

\*Thanks for letting me know,\* John said gratefully. \*Send Irillith to my Ready Room, then gather everyone else in here. I’ll find out what’s wrong with Irillith, then we’ll join you.\*

Alyssa hesitated for a second. \*You don’t want to tell everyone about the Nymphs first?\*

\*The twins won’t be able to concentrate until we sort this out and I want them focused. Besides, I want to resolve whatever’s upsetting Irillith as quickly as possible.\*

\*She’s on her way,\* the blonde replied.

John left the Briefing Room and strode across the Bridge with a quick glance at the grav-tubes to check if the Maliri had arrived yet. With the coast still clear, he entered the Ready Room, then glanced at his desk as he pondered where to wait for her. Making his decision, he drummed his fingers on his leg as he wondered how best to encourage Irillith to open to him.

The door chimed not long after, so he turned and called out, “Enter.”

When Irillith walked in with faltering steps, it only took John one glance to see exactly what was upsetting the Maliri hacker. She looked distraught and he instantly recognised the look of shame and guilt on her face.

“John!” she blurted out in surprise, startled to find him standing right beside the door.

Trying exactly the same tactic that had worked so well on her sister, John stepped forward and gathered Irillith in his arms, dipping her for a heated kiss. She squeaked in shock, then just as quickly as Tashana had, relaxed in his embrace and returned the passionate clinch... with plenty of tongue. John scooped her up and placed her on one of the closest sofas, then knelt beside her as they continued the fervent kiss. When he finally pulled back to take a breath, he saw that Irillith was looking dazed, but their thrilling reunion had banished her frown and replaced it with a dopey smile.

“Are you okay?” he asked, brushing his fingers through her snowy white hair. “We’ve all been really worried about you.”

Irillith’s expression darkened immediately, and she turned away, unable to meet his concerned gaze.

“Uh, uh... no keeping secrets,” he gently chastised her, as he tilted her chin back to face him. “Tell me what’s wrong, or I’ll have to tickle it out of you.”

She let out a disbelieving laugh, but it sounded sardonic rather than amused.

“Let me guess... You’re feeling guilty about running from combat?” he asked intuitively, watching her enchanting violet eyes for a reaction.

There was a dark flicker there, then she slowly nodded.

“Why?” he asked in genuine confusion. “You were under constant psychic attack and when Helene couldn’t protect you anymore, you broke under the onslaught. There’s no shame in that. We were directly underneath the generator powering the Mists and the psychic field in there was intense... any normal woman would have been driven insane almost instantly. We were incredibly lucky that Tashana managed to hold on; that robot nearly killed me and Dana, but your sister saved our lives.”

Rather than be rallied by his supportive words, she looked even more despondent.

Bewildered by her reaction, he sat back on his haunches and racked his brain to try to figure out what might be upsetting her. “Okay, I’m totally stumped,” he finally admitted, conceding defeat. “Just tell me what’s wrong and we’ll fix it.”

A tear rolled down her cheek and she looked to be on the verge of bursting into tears. “I let you down,” she confessed, sounding utterly dejected. “I failed everyone.”

“No you didn’t!” he exclaimed, shocked by her reaction. “I’ve just explained why you fled and it certainly wasn’t your fault!”

Irillith shook her head mournfully. “It was all my fault. The only reason I ran was because I was weak... so much weaker than the other girls.”

John blinked in surprise. “Oh...”

“And not just there,” she said, her shoulders slumping. “I failed you on Valaden in Mael’nerak’s bunker when I blundered into his trap and triggered all the defences. Then I failed you on Kythshara when I was so shaken by the thought of facing more sentinels, I didn’t even try to hack the pyramid’s digital network. You were almost killed by that robot... and it was entirely my fault.”

John was quiet for a moment, realising that empty platitudes would only make her feel worse.

She saw his pensive frown and turned away in shame. “I’m so sorry...” she sobbed, the floodgate finally opening.

“Come here,” John said, pulling her into a hug as she wept against his chest. “You’re right... you are weaker psychically than Dana and Tashana.”

Her crying intensified, soaking his shirt.

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of, honey,” he said quietly, rubbing her back.

“I was useless...” she whimpered. “I put everyone in danger.”

“Forget what happened on Valaden and Kythshara. We all survived, so it doesn’t matter now,” John said, his voice firm and insistent. “Do you want to know the reason why you broke first?”

She sniffed and nodded. “Because I was weaker than the others?”

“Well yes, but there’s a very good reason for that,” he replied calmly. “Your sister spent a decade honing her psychic abilities to protect herself in the Unclaimed Wastes. Her brain tumour was giving her splitting migraines because she kept constantly pushing her limits. You hadn’t even had a mild headache, because you didn’t start using your abilities until we met a few months ago. You heard Helene when she described how she perceived each of you. Tashana is incredibly powerful... in fact she’s nearly on the same kind of level as Jade and Alyssa... which I must admit caught me by surprise.”

Irillith thought about that for a moment, then asked, “What about Dana?”

John chuckled and gave her an indulgent smile. “You mean the girl who’s constantly begging me for more cum? I think if you added up all our time together, I must’ve spend a few weeks buried down her throat. I’ve had to load her up constantly because we needed every Progenitor schematic we could get... and you’ve seen the consequences. She can create black holes at will, for god’s sake! How can you possibly compare yourself to that?”

She let out an embarrassed laugh. “I suppose you’re right. I was just so disappointed in myself... even our Doctor and Empath are stronger than I am.”

“That’s easy to explain too,” John said, stroking Irillith’s hair to comfort her. “Rachel’s called the Angel of Terra for very good reason. After every recent conflict she’s been using huge amounts of psychic energy to mass heal wounds and even regenerate severed limbs. She’s been constantly using her abilities and pushing herself to the brink of exhaustion on multiple occasions.”

“And Helene?”

“Don’t underestimate her, honey,” John gently chided the Maliri. “Helene might be one of our newest recruits, but she’s helped hundreds-of-thousands of people recover from massive psychological trauma. Then she nearly killed herself trying to protect all of you when I confronted my guide. It’s true that her runic affinity helped Helene resist the effects of the Mists, but that girl never even flinched and nobody was shielding her mind.”

“And the way she cracked the black metal was like hitting an ice cube with a sledgehammer,” Irillith agreed, wiping away her tears.

“Exactly. Alyssa managed to blast a hole in the shuttle, but she tapped out half the network doing that. You know what Helene was doing when she accidentally broke the bed...”

Irillith blushed a fetching shade of dark blue and this time her laughter was genuine.

John gave her a kiss, then sat back lost in thought. “It’d be interesting to know how you compared with the rest of the girls.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “Let’s be honest... I’m the least powerful Lioness, aren’t I?”

With a sudden flash of insight, John shook his head. “No... actually you’re not, even when all we’re doing is comparing psychic abilities.”

“I’d like to hope I’m stronger than Jehanna,” Irillith said with a strained smile.

“Yes, obviously,” he said with a shrug. “I’ve only just given her a runic affinity.”

“There’s no way I’m more powerful than Sakura...”

“No, but she’s a special case. I’ve been enhancing her to fight at my side against Progenitors and she’s stacked with more abilities than any of the rest of you. Plus she’s extremely dedicated and has been training relentlessly to hone her skills.”

“I’m stronger than Calara?!” Irillith asked, looking shocked.

John nodded in confirmation. “It shouldn’t be that surprising. Calara has a very specialised set of eldritch abilities, which she’s only been able to use in a handful of fleet battles. She’s invaluable on the crew for all her tactical and strategic expertise, but I’ve neglected developing her psychic abilities because we’ve had so much else to deal with... so thanks for the reminder.”

Irillith looked thoughtful now rather than upset. “I suppose I’m a bit like her.”

“That’s true, you’re both used to fighting ship battles rather than ground missions. Your hacking abilities have been incredibly useful on countless occasions, especially against the Kirrix, with all the civilian rescues that we never could’ve achieved without you.”

“But it was my hacking that let us down on Valaden,” Irillith said sadly.

“Yes, but I think you rely far more on your formidable hacking skills than using your psychic abilities to assist. That’s worked magnificently against anyone you can easily hack, but you were going up against Mael’nerak’s digital constructs... and he’s the most gifted programmer we’ve ever heard of. I think you’re going to have to work on improving your raw psychic potential to really even the odds.”

She grimaced and nodded.

John paused and looked at her curiously. “Why did you react that way?”

“What do you mean?”

“You flinched... as though I just asked you to do something unpleasant.”

Irillith faltered, suddenly looking unsure of herself. “I don’t really know.” After several moments of self-reflection, she concluded, “I suppose it’s because... I just don’t feel that comfortable using them.”

\*John... I think Rachel has figured out why,\* Alyssa interjected quietly. \*This all stems back to Irillith’s childhood with Edraele...\*

\*Oh no...\* the Maliri Matriarch gasped, sounding horrified. \*I tortured her so many times... and I used telekinesis to do it! Over and over again... It’s no wonder she’s so reluctant to use her abilities... oh, my poor little girl!\*

\*We’ve been over this before, Edraele,\* John said sternly. \*You two are completely different people now!\*

\*I-I know...\* she stammered. \*I just remember all of it...\*

\*Not for much longer,\* he stated with conviction. \*I never should’ve agreed to let either of you keep those horrible memories. They don’t help and all they do is torture the pair of you. You should probably skip dinner, because I’ll deal with you tonight. I’ll resolve this nonsense with Irillith when I get back to the Invictus.\*

\*I’m sorry, my Lord,\* Edraele whispered, her tone contrite but with an undercurrent of a very different emotion.

\*Edraele? Are you turned on?\* Alyssa asked with amusement.

\*I can’t help it,\* she admitted, sounding flustered. \*John’s never usually this domineering with me... I love it.\*

He rolled his eyes, then focused on Irillith again. She appeared lost in thought, but no longer upset, her expression one of quiet contemplation.

“You okay there, Irillith?” he asked, cupping her face and stroking her cheek. “You zoned out for a minute.”

“I think I know why I’ve been so reluctant to truly embrace my psychic abilities!” she replied, perking up considerably. “When I was a child, I heard all sorts of horror stories about what my grandmother used to do to people... and the ultimate consequences of her pyromania. Then after what my mother did to my father...” her voice trailed off and she looked forlorn rather than guilt-stricken.

“You’re a very clever girl,” John complimented her, admiring how quickly she analysed her own emotions. “I think you’ve figured out the problem.”

“How can I get past it though?” she asked, looking at him plaintively.

“Well if I’m learning any new skill, I like to train with an expert. Take your pick out of Alyssa, Sakura, or Tashana, any of them would be able to give you very useful advice.”

“Not you?” she asked hopefully.

“I’m not a natural with my psychic abilities,” he freely admitted. “I’ve been relying on blind luck and instinct to get me through a lot of battles.”

“Don’t forget the handy crutch of righteous over-protective fury,” Irillith said with a wry grin.

He laughed and nodded. “Yeah a lot of that too.”

She looked at him askance as he awkwardly shifted position. “Is this conversation turning you on?”

That provoked laughter from Alyssa, which made John blush even harder with embarrassment.

“It is!” Irillith said with a giggle.

“I can’t help it,” he admitted, inadvertently echoing her mother. “I was just thinking about ways I could help you... then the obvious sprang to mind.”

“Am I going to be your new pet project? Like Dana was?” she asked, her pupils flaring with arousal.

“It’s become abundantly clear that my haughty Maliri princess has been slacking off. I’ve been much too lenient with you in the past and you’re obviously in need of a firm hand. I think you might benefit from some sterner discipline.”

She licked her lips then swallowed, her trembling hand reaching for her throat.

He nodded, meeting her heated stare. “You seem to have built quite the rapport with Jehanna, which is good, because the two of you will be sharing a lot of meals together. You also seem to enjoy playing a dominant role with her, but I think it would be useful for her to see your true nature...”

Irillith’s eyes flicked to his trousers, practically panting with lust. “Can we...?”

“Afraid not,” he replied, shaking his head. “I just spent the last couple of hours screwing your sister senseless, then tonight I’ll be giving your mother a good workout.”

She squeezed her thighs together and groaned, sagging against him with a frustrated sigh.

“Did you just cum?” he asked her in surprise.

Irillith blushed and nodded. “A little one... you got me so turned on.”

“No more now,” he admonished her, giving the dazed Maliri a firm swat on her rump that made her yelp. “I want you climbing the walls when I get back.”

Rising to his feet, he offered her a hand and Irillith stood on shaky legs.

“Come on, we have an important meeting to attend,” he said, leading her out of his Ready Room.

“Can I go and get changed first?” she pleaded. “I’m absolutely soaked!”

He paused and looked in her eyes. “You can, but Tashana’s very upset. She’s under the impression that you’re angry at her for choosing to save my life instead of guiding you to safety. Can we speak to her first?”

Irillith’s jaw dropped in horror and she sobered up instantly. “Where is she?! I need to explain!”

“She’s in the Briefing Room, but you’re telepathically linked with her,” John reminded the shocked hacker. “Just let her back into your mind and tell her right now.”

She immediately did as he asked, then a flurry of wildly conflicting emotions flashed across her face as the twins launched into a frenzied bout of apologies. John guided Irillith over to the conference room, just in time for Tashana to rush out to her sister. The pair hugged fiercely, crying tears of relief.

“Go freshen up, then come back as quickly as you can,” John said, stroking their backs. “When you return, I’ll tell you all about the Nymphs.”

The twins sprinted for the grav-tubes and by the time John and the girls had all settled around the long conference table, the two Maliri were back. They both looked a little flustered, but had managed to change outfits and wash away all the tears in only a few minutes.

“Welcome back, ladies,” John said, holding out their chairs for them as they sat down.

“C’mon! Don’t keep us in suspense any longer!” Dana protested, bouncing impatiently on her seat. “What did you find out?!”

“It’s probably easier for me to show you,” John said after a moment’s thought. “Could you pass me the remote please?”

Irillith slid it across the table into his waiting hand. “There you go... Baen’thelas,” she said with an odd lilt to her voice.

When John glanced her way, he saw that she was now sporting her collar. They made brief eye contact and shared a coy smile, then he picked up the remote and began tapping on icons. A floating holograph appeared above the table, with a single hexagon rotating slowly at the centre. John navigated the interface with a frown, then looked at the handful of disjointed hexagons with frustration.

“Do you need a hand with that?” Calara asked patiently.

He let out a self-deprecating laugh as he handed it over. “I just realised I haven’t given a single holo-presentation in the entire time we’ve been aboard the Invictus.”

“How would you like the image configured?” the Latina asked. “In a tight cluster like a hex-shield?”

John didn’t answer and just stared at the image in fascination, as the light seemed to bend before his eyes.

“John?” she prompted him, touching his hand. “Just tell me what you need and I can set it up for you.”

“There’s no need,” he said quietly, gesturing towards the three dimensional projection.

Blue light flared in his eyes and the hexagons locked together, forming a simple seven-tiled geometric shape.

“This is how Mael’nerak constructed a Nymph’s mental architecture,” he said, rotating the image for his spellbound audience.

“But I didn’t see anything like that,” Alyssa said, looking at him in confusion.

“That’s because you aren’t their true Master,” he explained, staring at the projection. “Nymphs are designed to respond to a Progenitor... any Progenitor... and submit their report.”

“Any Progenitor?!” Betrixa blurted out in alarm. “Master... what if-“

He stroked the catgirl’s shoulder to soothe her. “You belong to me, Betrixa, and I’d never let you be abused. When I fed you, I instinctively stripped away that compulsion to obey a Progenitor when I altered your Core Instincts.”

The five Nymphs in attendance all let out a collective sigh of relief.

“Okay, I’ve already got three questions,” Rachel said raising her hand.

John hesitated, then nodded for her to proceed. “Go ahead, then keep the rest until the end.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully. “First of all, what do you mean by ‘submit a report’?”

“It’ll be easier to explain that when I’ve described the layout of a Nymph’s mind. Next question?”

“Why have you only been able to discover this now?” the brunette asked with interest.

“My guide prevented me from using telepathy, and a Nymph needs a projected telepathic connection to trigger this response.”

“Okay, last question,” Rachel said eagerly. “When you said ‘Core Instincts’, you said it as though it had special significance.”

“Very good,” he acknowledged with a nod. “That’s Mael’nerak’s naming convention... or at least a translation of the ancient Maliri. The central hexagon is compartmentalised to store a Nymph’s Core Instincts, and contains all the rules they must adhere too.”

Dana leaned forward on the edge of her seat. “Rules? Like what?”

“We already know most of them. A Nymph must shapeshift to become a Master’s perfect mate, then obey all his commands, and service all his desires. They’re never allowed to wield weapons under any circumstances and even carrying them makes a Nymph very uncomfortable. They cannot accept a female as their Mistress, or adopt a male form. There’s also strict guidelines on their diction which is why they refer to themselves in the third person.”

“But you’ve encouraged them to break most of those,” Rachel murmured, looking on in fascination.

He nodded, then gestured towards the floating projection. One of the six hexagons on the periphery began to flash, drawing everyone’s attention.

“This hexagon stores their personality, which covers all the parameters that their master chooses for a Nymph when he claims her. I think that’s fairly self-explanatory.”

The adjacent hexagon began to flash, glowing with a cool blue.

“The current master’s profile is stored here, with detailed records of his personality, sexual proclivities, and social standing.”

There was another flash signifying a change of hexagons under scrutiny.

“The next lays out a detailed matrix of the master’s network of acquaintances, listing his ‘mates’, any extended family, as well as all his friends and colleagues.”

Sakura frowned and shot John a look of concern. “This sounds more like a detailed profile for an assassination than guidelines on how to be an effective sex slave. I’ve read hundreds of dossiers with precisely this kind of information!”

He nodded, his expression solemn. “You’re very close to the truth.”

“What about the last three hexagons,” Calara asked in a hushed voice. “What do they store?”

“This one stores ‘Trivial Mementos’ or more mundane memories of a Nymph’s daily interactions. Everything they’ve experienced with this particular master is stored here, which includes sex sessions, their ongoing relationship status, as well as any conversations with family and friends.”

John took a deep breath, then the penultimate hexagon flashed.

“Now we get to the highest priority one of them all, which filters out very specific information to be collated in a report given to a Progenitor.”

“Like what?” Dana murmured, darting a wide-eyed glance at the enthralled Nymphs.

John held up his hand and began ticking off items with his fingers. “Any technology they’ve witnessed, with blueprints given the highest priority of them all. Fleet assets and fleet capabilities that the Nymph has personally seen or heard discussed by their master. The locations and strength of any starbases or other defensive assets... the lists go on and on, but you get the picture.”

“They’re spies!” Jehanna blurted out, gaping at Ailita in astonishment.

He nodded and gently stroked Marika’s lustrous black hair. “And very, very good ones. Each Nymph is like a personalised honey trap for any male who chooses to become their new master. They can discern and store staggering amounts of military information, whilst endearing themselves to their master in such an overwhelmingly way that most men would never willingly part with them.”

“Men? Or males?” Rachel said quietly. “Mael’nerak didn’t create Nymphs to infiltrate humanity...”

“Very good, Doctor Voss,” he said, as she reached the heart of the matter. “I’m convinced that the Nymphs were designed to fatally undermine and ultimately destroy a very alien civilisation.”

“The Achonin,” Tashana whispered, her eyes like saucers. “They must have been too powerful for Mael’nerak to defeat using standard Progenitor tactics. If the Achonin had a tech advantage, throwing waves of inferior thrall fleets at powerful alien warships would cause staggering losses and never achieve victory. We’ve seen what happens in those circumstances time and time again.”

“I thought the Achonin were peaceful?” Dana asked, frowning in confusion. “That Mael’nerak easily overwhelmed them?”

Tashana blinked as she had a sudden realisation. “We only know that from Valada’s archives... but the Achonin war predates her becoming Mael’nerak’s matriarch by thousands of years. That means we can’t rely on her as a reliable source for anything that happened back then. Mael’nerak might have been lying to her, or simply bragging to make himself look good.”

With a smirk of amusement, Dana said, “You’re totally right. I can’t imagine him saying, ‘Yeah, babes... I fought these Achonin dudes and they whipped my ass. I had to send in some hot pussy to do the hard work for me!’.” She suddenly blanched and looked at the Nymphs in consternation. “Ohmigod... I’m so sorry! I’m making tasteless jokes... and this is all about what happened to you!”

“That’s quite alright, Dana,” Neysa said, walking around the table to give the mortified redhead a reassuring hug. “This all happened 60 millennia ago and none of us have any recollection of those memories.”

John placed his hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “That’s very true. Mael’nerak expunged the memories of every Nymph, so that they wouldn’t remember anything that happened in the Achonin War. We know Jade can actually remember the ceremony where he wiped all their previous memories, but I’d guess that she doesn’t have memories of the Achonin war either.”

“You sound dead certain about the Nymphs not remembering anything from that far back,” Calara noted. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because the last hexagon stores a condensed memory stack of all their previous masters. It’s all neatly catalogued there, starting from the moment the Nymphs were discovered by the Terrans that landed on Lenarra.”

“Everything?” the brunette asked, looking nauseous.

He gave her a grim nod. “Yes... everything.”

Betrixa looked up at him, a strangely vulnerable expression on her beautiful face. “John... I hate the thought of having those memories in my head. Is it possible to remove any trace of a time when you were not my Master?”

Her sisters nodded their agreement, all of them looking equally unsettled.

“I’ll need to feed you to make sure it’s effective, but yes, I can wipe out all those previous memories for you. It’ll be like you were never touched by another man before you met me.”

They all sagged with relief, a look of profound gratitude on their faces.

“Thank you, Master,” Neysa said sincerely, straightening up and giving him an appreciative kiss. “Even the thought of being tainted by association with a previous master is... repulsive.”

“I’ll take care of it, don’t worry.”

“So where does Jade fit into all this?” Calara asked, glancing at the rotating hologram.

Helene spoke up and asked, “Have you worked out how we can save her?”

John’s confident expression wavered and he made a sharp gesture towards the cluster of hexagons. “Before I answer that, first let me show you how Jade’s mind is configured.”

The initial group of hexagons was suddenly filled with data archives, the vertical stacks storing mountains of information.

“That’s actual a precise reproduction of Neysa’s mind,” he explained to the girls. “Each Nymph is like an incredibly advanced biological computer, with staggering amounts of data stored within their crystal heart.”

“What about Jade?” Helene asked, voicing the question that was on everybody’s mind.

“I don’t know yet,” John admitted. “I’ve studied all of the other Nymphs and the metaphysical framework of their minds is identical. We know that Jade is able to recall thousands of years of memories, from the centuries spent as a sex slave for pirates, to her time living in a hunter-gatherer tribe on Lenarra. My best guess is that something like this must have happened...”

The second image showed the same basic layout, but instead of all the information neatly filed away in ordered archives, it looked like the condensed memory stacks had bubbled over. Data flooded out to spill over the surrounding hexagons, swamping everything in a bewildering mess of jumbled information.

“It hurts just to look at it,” Helene said, wincing and turning away.

“How does she even function without going crazy?” Dana asked in disbelief. “And why have all the boundaries broken down in her mind?”

“This is just hypothetical at the moment,” John explained, glancing at the perplexing image. “It feels right and would explain how Jade can recall so much about her previous lives. As for why it happened... I honestly don’t know, but the Achonin glyphs must have something to do with it.”

Alyssa had stayed silent through the entire presentation, having been privy to all the information via John’s thoughts while he studied the Nymphs. For the first time that afternoon, she decided to contribute to the discussion.

“I think I might know what happened to Jade,” she began, drawing everyone’s attention with her ominous tone. “The Achonin must have discovered who and what she was, then done to her, what Edraele did to the assassins the old matriarchs sent to kill her.”

“They turned her into a double-agent!” Irillith gasped, looking at John in shock.

“That would explain her extreme reaction to approaching Kythshara,” Rachel said, her expression equally grim. “The Achonin runes activated and attempted to seize control. They must have been designed to turn Jade against her Progenitor Master.”

“But she fought back,” Helene said, tears in her eyes. “She locked up her mind to stop herself from being forced to betray you!”

“And now she’s frozen in horror, desperately trying not to succumb,” Rachel concluded, her professional composure shattering. “We have to help her, John! We can’t let Jade stay like this for a second longer than is absolutely necessary!”

“I know,” he agreed, rubbing his hand across his weary face. “I just wish I knew of some way to counteract and destroy the Achonin glyphs. The consequences if I fail don’t even bare thinking about.”

“What are you going to do now?” Calara asked, rising to her feet and giving him a supportive hug. “We’ll do anything you can think of that could help Jade.”

“That’s the problem... I don’t know how to help her. Can any of you suggest anything that might be useful?”

He swept his gaze around the conference table and was met with helpless looks, or sorrowful shakes of their heads.

John let out a heavy sigh. “In that case, it looks like we’re stuck with Plan B.”

Tashana grimaced and said what they were all thinking, “I dread to ask, but what’s Plan B?”

“Make telepathic contact with Jade’s mind and try to destroy the Achonin glyphs... without permanently damaging her personality.”

“Except, you haven’t got the first inkling about how to do any of those things,” Rachel said, her worried frown deepening.

“Exactly,” he agreed.

Dana stared at each of them in turn. “Shit...”

John nodded. “That about sums it up.”

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“I know you all have your own personal grievances towards High Command after the way you’ve been treated over the years,” Stefan said, looking around at his captivated audience. “I was just like you only a few months ago. I was angry that we’ve suffered decades of neglect in the Outer Rim, while the Admiralty focused all their resources and attention on their beloved Core Worlds. I was tearing my hair out with frustration as urgent requests to Colonial Administration were constantly delayed or ignored.”

This prompted a lot of angry muttering, with disgruntled Governors nodding their agreement.

“But believe me when I tell you, nothing prepared me for how much I hate those bastards in High Command now! I had to watch helplessly as good friends... people I’ve known and loved all my life, were raped and killed by those hellspawned Kirrix!”

The room went quiet, sympathetic eyes flicking to the handful of seated Governors whose colonies had been besieged and ravaged by the alien invaders.

“How do you console a heartbroken mother, when you have to tell her that her little girl and baby boy have been chopped up... and fucking eaten!” He choked and brushed a hand across his face, wiping away his angry tears. “And those fuckers in the Admiralty sat back and let it happen! They withdrew all the border fleets to protect Terra and never gave a shit about any of us!”

There was silence amongst the governors as they listened to his furious speech, their expressions a mixture of sympathy, anger, and fear.

“Make no mistake, you would’ve been next,” Stefan declared, making eye contact with the members of his audience. “High Command would’ve sacrificed all of us without a second thought, if it meant protecting the Core Worlds from attack. They just see us as disposable assets; worlds they can strip bare of resources and give the absolute minimum back. We will never be their priority... and the situation just got a whole lot worse.”

“Worse? How?!” Reyes Angevin asked in alarm.

“You must have seen the news,” Stefan replied. “The Kintark Empire surrendered and High Command has just acquired over 300 more worlds. So where do you think that leaves us?”

“Right at the bottom of the shitheap,” the Menganus IV Governor muttered with resentment.

“Exactly!” Stefan declared adamantly. “There’s no future for any of us staying under Terran Federation control. The only way forward is to declare our independence and start looking after our own interests, instead of supporting the greedy leeches in the Core Worlds. With all of us pulling together, we’ve got access to enough mineral resources, manufacturing capabilities, and agri-worlds to support a massive colony rush of citizens looking to escape the Federation’s tyranny.”

“You really think people will give up their cushy lives in the Core Worlds to live out on the frontier?” Lucyna asked sceptically.

“Sure they will!” Stefan said enthusiastically. Turning to Anastasia Volkov, he asked, “How much is Colony Administration charging Lithotanian citizens for Federation protection?”

“The basic rate of tax used to be 12%, but in the last five years they’ve increased it to 20%!” she seethed, her eyes hardening with resentment. “Then they leave my administration to deal with all the riots and the protests, when the taxes we collect are only being used for infrastructure improvements and planetary services!”

“What would you say if I offered to scrap the tax entirely?” he said enticingly.

She gave him a sceptical look. “My citizens would call you a hero and build statues in your honour... until they’re abducted by the Kirrix and die cursing your name. I’m willing to listen to a serious proposal Mr. Vaughn, but I won’t sit here and waste my time indulging absurd fantasies. Protecting our colonies from hostile aliens is a fundamental responsibility of any colonial government; paying taxes for military protection is an unfortunate but undeniable necessity.”

“Believe me, I know all too well the consequences of leaving colonies inadequately defended,” he said, nodding in agreement. “But I promise you, I’d never let that happen. Hell, Brecken’s World is right on the Kirrix border... we’d be the first to fall if our borders weren’t secure.”

“So how are you proposing to keep us safe?” she asked, looking intrigued.

“That’s a very good question,” he replied, leaning over to activate the holo-projector built into the conference table.

A three-dimensional map of the Terran Federation appeared, rotating slowly in the centre of the room. On the map were depicted the bordering alien civilisations, with different colours highlighting their territory.

“I’m sure all of you have been following recent galactic developments as closely as I have,” he said, looking around at his attentive audience. “High Command might like to keep its planetary governors in the dark, but that doesn’t mean we have to sit there with our eyes shut too. I don’t know how the rest of you operate, but I’ve got a few dedicated citizens serving in the military who remember where their true loyalties lie... back home with their families.”

He tapped a button on the interface and the Ashanath Collective began to flash. “The Greys have never been a threat to us and there’s no reason to believe they ever will be in the future. The only danger from this side of the galaxy is the Drakkar, but they just threw everything they’ve got at the Grey’s homeworld and got wiped out. We won’t have to worry about raiders for years.”

“How can you be so sure?” the governor from Asrad Delta asked with a puzzled frown.

“I can’t reveal my sources, but this comes right from the top,” Stefan replied. “The Lion was involved in the battle. He informed High Command about it personally and Blake’s got no reason to lie.”

Next he highlighted the Trankaran Republic, which spread out below the colonies located in the Outer Rim.

“The Trankarans have always wanted more trade with us, but we’ve been locked into dealing with the merchant guilds in the Core Worlds. By cutting out the greedy middle-man and massively ramping up trade, we’ll make far more in commercial taxes than we ever would from direct taxation on citizens. Best of all, they won’t even notice the tax hike, because the price of goods won’t increase! The rockmen have just fought off a Kirrix invasion themselves, so they’ll be desperate for allies. This is the perfect time to reach out to them and offer them the hand of friendship.”

“But we won’t be able to offer them a military alliance when we’ve got no military,” Anastasia said, looking at the Trankaran Republic speculatively.

“And why haven’t we got a military? We’ve been paying through the nose for it!” Stefan snarled, thumping the table with his fist. “When the time is right, we’ll take what we’re owed!”

Bryce gave him a wry smile. “I could be wrong about this, but I doubt High Command will just hand over several fleets.”

“Yeah, but how many ships are manned by men and women who grew up on the Outer Rim? Who sympathise with us and would want to fight for their own kin? When we declare our independence, they’ll want to come home... and bring their ships with them.”

“That sounds like an awfully big gamble and nothing we can really rely on,” Anastasia said, shaking her head. “Please tell me you have some evidence to support this.”

“He’s right,” Andros Petrides interjected, his voice firm with conviction. “Many of the ships based at Port Heracles are crewed by local personnel. They requested those postings to make visiting family on shore leave more convenient. I’ve had some very frank conversations with a number of ship captains that are very sympathetic to our cause. You’d be surprised at the level of resentment within the military towards High Command.”

Stefan tapped another button on the interface and the Brimorian Enclave began to flash. “I’m sure you’ve all seen the TFNN broadcasts about escalating tensions with the Brimorians. With the Terran Federation getting into a territory war with the Enclave, neither side will be looking for trouble with us. In fact, the Brimorians might even offer us some support, if we can convince them that our independence would weaken the Terran Federation.”

The next click highlighted the Maliri Regency which loomed over the empires below. “Admiral Blake is friends with the Maliri and even convinced them to intervene at the Battle of Terra. We’ve had confirmation from the Lionesses that he sympathises with us, so I’m sure we won’t have any trouble establishing extensive trade agreements with the Maliri.”

“Hold up. How do you know that?” Reyes Angevin asked, looking deeply sceptical.

“Fleet Admiral Devereux announced it herself in a TFNN interview,” Stefan explained, before looking at the man with sympathy. “The broadcast went out around the time you were captured by the Kirrix.”

Blushing with embarrassment, he muttered, “Oh... right.”

“Which just leaves the only real threat...” A final click highlighted Kirrix Space. Pointing towards the border, he continued, “This is where we’ll need the bulk of our forces... but we’ve got plenty of time to prepare our defences.”

“How can you be so sure?” Anastasia asked, staring fearfully at the source of the alien menace.

Rather than directly answering her question, he turned to the new governor of Carolus III. “Dominic, would you tell us what happened when the Kirrix attacked your homeworld?”

Dominic MacMillan was the newest governor in attendance. He had recently replaced Governor Cochran, who committed suicide rather than deal with the survivor’s guilt he suffered in the aftermath of the Kirrix invasion.

Clearing his throat, he began, “I was in one of the last groups that was captured by the Kirrix. They didn’t find us for days after the planet was invaded because we hid in a bunker under the capitol building...” His voice faded and he looked down shamefaced.

“We all would’ve done the same thing,” Stefan said gruffly. “Go on.”

With a sigh of regret, Dominic renewed his story. “The Bugs lined us up... made us form a queue to board their hive ships. We all knew what was going to happen to us after we were forced inside. I’ve never been so scared... it was terrifying...”

Lucyna swallowed, feeling a cold sweat on her brow. Just hearing the story triggered awful memories that she never wanted to remember again. Bryce reached over and clasped her hand, giving it a supportive squeeze. She gripped his tight in return and gave him a grateful smile.

“Then out of nowhere the Lionesses arrived,” Dominic said, his face filled with wonder. “The hive ship just... exploded... and all these pieces of metal shredded the bugs. I’ve never seen anything like it, the Kirrix were torn to pieces! There was blood everywhere... and bits of them just showered the ground like confetti...”

Shaking his head in disbelief, he continued, “We were keeping our heads down, trying not to get hit, but I swear... not one of us got so much as a scratch.” He paused for a moment, lost in the memories, then blinked as he focused on the spellbound audience. “Anyway, the Bugs were gone. Every last one had been ripped apart... and not just at the ship where I was captured, but everywhere on Carolus III. The Lion and the Lionesses killed everything... I mean, they made sure every last one of those insectoid bastards was never going to fuck with anyone ever again!”

Stefan gave him a grateful nod, then said quietly, “None of the Kirrix that attacked Brecken’s World survived either. When I was rescued, Blake and his crew wiped them out... and I’ve heard the same thing has been happening with all the worlds the Lion liberated. The Bugs have lost hundreds of ship and millions of troops; it’s going to take them decades to recover from those kinds of losses.”

“I believe you about everything you saw happen,” Anastasia said cautiously. “But how do we know that the Kirrix aren’t planning another invasion? They could have more ships in reserve... and attack us when we’re vulnerable and undefended.”

“No, they won’t,” Lucyna blurted out. “They’re too busy fightin’ a civil war.”

“A civil war?” the Lithotania Governor repeated, doubt in her eyes. “How do you know that?”

“The Lionesses told me,” Lucyna explained. “Alyssa caused it. She told the Kirrix that if they didn’t bring back all the colonists they took, the Lion would blow up their homeworld.”

Anastasia looked at her with sympathy. “Luce... they were probably just exaggerating to make you feel better.”

“No, they were tellin’ me the truth!” she declared adamantly. “If you’d ever met them, you’d know what they’re like. They wouldn’t lie to me, not about this. If they said that blonde angel terrified the Kirrix so bad they started killin’ each other, I believe every word. Hell, I saw Bug troops blast one of them Hive Lords with my own eyes! Then they dragged us onto their ship and rushed us back home! After tossing us out like yesterday’s garbage, they high-tailed it the fuck outta there!”

Reyes Angevin coughed awkwardly to get everyone’s attention. “I saw the Lion in action... and he can do shit you wouldn’t even believe. If the Lionesses told Luce that they made the Bugs fight a civil war... I don’t have a shadow of a doubt that it’s true.”

Stefan looked at Lucyna with concern, seeing how much her outburst had taken out of the flustered woman. “Do you need to take a break?”

Before she could reply, the doors to the conference room crashed open and a man wearing a technician’s uniform burst inside. Everyone jumped in shock at the loud bang, twisting around to see who it was. Governor Vaughn was about to rebuke the technician for disturbing such a critical meeting, but the look of terror in the man’s eyes made him freeze.

“A Federation fleet just jumped in!” he gasped, panting for breath. “They know you’re all here!”

“What?!” Stefan blurted out as he leapt up from his chair, sending it toppling over with a crash. “It must be a coincidence... there’s no way they could react that fast!”

The man frantically shook his head. “The Fleet Admiral’s with them. She’s hailing us!”

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